MUNICIPAL PERSPECTIVES ON ALBERTA'S FUTURE

Discussion Paper

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2001, Alberta Municipal Affairs Minister Guy Boutilier announced the creation of the Minister's Provincial/Municipal Council on Roles and Responsibilities in the 21st Century. The main objective of the Council, which includes representatives of the province, Alberta's municipalities, and the Alberta Economic Development Authority, is to forge a stronger partnership between the province and municipalities.

The purpose of this paper is to provide some broad perspectives related to municipal contributions, challenges, and opportunities for the future.

A FUTURE ALBERTA NEEDS STRONG MUNICIPALITIES

No discussion of Alberta's future can occur apart from a discussion as to the well-being and future role of the province's local governments. The health, diversity and vitality of the province and its municipalities are inextricably linked.

For Albertans to continue to enjoy a high standard of living and quality of life, it is essential that the places where they make their homes, conduct their business, attend school, and devote their leisure time are able to function effectively and viably.

Strong, vibrant, diverse and viable municipalities are essential to Alberta's future.

ALBERTA'S MUNICIPALITIES IN THE PROVINCIAL SETTING

Alberta's municipal sector includes more than 350 cities, towns, villages, summer villages, and rural and specialized municipalities. Municipalities comprise one of Canada's three orders of government and they have many direct service interfaces with the general public. Governed by locally elected councils, these local jurisdictions provide the local services that impact the daily lives of every Albertan.

The wide array of programs and services delivered by municipalities encompass protective services such as policing, fire protection, ambulance, and disaster services; roadway planning, construction and maintenance (as well as public transportation services in some communities); family support services; planning and development services; recreation and cultural programs; water, sewage, stormwater, and solid waste services; library services; and economic development and other local programming.

It costs municipalities approximately $4.5 billion annually to provide these services to Albertans - an amount similar in magnitude to the province's expenditures for education and only somewhat less than provincial health care costs. Most of the money comes from residents and businesses within the community through property taxes and user fees.

These services are not only essential to the smooth and safe operation of each community, but they are directly responsible for a good part of the quality of life every Albertan enjoys.

Alberta's municipalities have two fundamental and distinguishing features that contribute strongly to Alberta's institutional strength and socio-economic fabric.

The first relates to the accessibility, accountability, and responsiveness that come from municipalities' decentralized form of service delivery and from the strong sensitivity of municipal governing bodies to local needs and priorities. Municipalities comprise the "closest" order of government to citizens and businesses.

The second significant feature pertains to the broad diversity that characterizes municipalities in terms of their population and geographic sizes, their economic structures and rates of growth, their demographic features, their community identities, and their local needs, priorities, and aspirations. This diversity represents an important strength: it offers locational choice to Albertans, fosters competition, and supports alternate approaches and "made-in-community" solutions. At the same time, this diversity demands that provincial and federal policies and programs remain attuned to the differing circumstances that exist across the province's many municipalities.

BUILDING ALBERTA'S FUTURE

Whatever picture of a future Alberta emerges from the summit, it is clear that the province's municipalities will have a critical role in achieving that vision. Through the services, facilities, and infrastructure provided locally, municipalities directly support and materially reinforce all of the themes seen to form important elements in a future Alberta, as illustrated below:

A Healthy Economy . . .	The province's economy is supported by municipalities through the provision of transportation, utility and other essential infrastructure; effective land use planning, development, and servicing processes; business development promotion and support activities; and competitive local government tax and fee levels.
A Healthy Environment . . .	Alberta's environmental leadership is reinforced by local water and sewage treatment; community storm water and solid waste management; the municipal preservation of parks and open spaces; and the provision of public transportation services.
Fiscal Responsibility . . .	Fiscal prudence and financial management have been demonstrated by municipalities over the years, as evidenced by their declining debt levels and per capita expenditures, the latter having fallen in real terms by more than 1% per year for more than a decade.
Vibrant, Viable Communities . . .	The strength and quality of life of Alberta's communities is supported in many ways by local governments: through various social and preventive programs and the close working relationships maintained with volunteer organizations; by providing parks, recreation, and cultural services and facilities; and by way of various neighborhood and street improvement and revitalization programs.

Health and Wellness . . .

Local governments contribute to the health of Albertans in several ways: the delivery of fire protection, ambulance, hazardous waste, and disaster preparedness services; the provision of clean water; the delivery of public transit and specialized transportation services for the disabled; and through a wide range of other local recreation and social programs that enhance the long-term "wellness" of Alberta's families.

Learning . . .

Alberta's municipalities have a number of inter-relationships with the education sector, ranging from the shared use of the property tax base for municipal and educational purposes, the municipal acquisition and servicing of school sites, the provision of library, parks and recreation facilities used by students, and the extensive use of public transportation and other municipal services by school-aged children.

Governance . . .

The governance model that characterizes the municipal sector has particular strengths in the context of an evolving Alberta: decentralization efficiencies, a high level of accessibility and accountability to residents, and a direct responsiveness to local needs and priorities which enables citizens to shape their own communities.

Alberta's future is clearly dependant upon the role municipalities will play in virtually all dimensions of the province's social and economic development. The achievement of the province's full potential will depend in part on municipalities' ability to provide the services and infrastructure required at the community level on a timely, effective, efficient, and continuing basis.

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Alberta's municipalities are integral to the realization of Albertans' longer-term vision for the province.

The overarching challenge for municipalities is to ensure that they remain responsive, accountable, effective, and efficient service providers.

The key to overcoming these challenges lies in pursuing the following opportunities:

- the fundamental need by municipalities to be **recognized as true partners with the provincial government** in the development of Alberta, with all that an effective partnership implies in terms of cooperation, mutual respect, and consultation;

- the requirement by municipalities for **adequate financial resources and funding opportunities** to meet their service and infrastructure mandates and responsibilities on a sustainable basis;

- the need to **clarify roles and responsibilities** as between the province and municipalities within the context of evolving service delivery demands and program interrelationships;

- the intensifying requirement to deal effectively with **inter-municipal and regional issues and opportunities**;

- the impacts of **new legislative and regulatory standards** imposed by the provincial and federal governments; and

- the on-going need to **attract new businesses and to grow economically** in order to maintain community vitality, create jobs, increase local incomes, and strengthen municipal fiscal bases.

The solutions to these challenges will require joint provincial-municipal cooperation and action.

MUNICIPAL VISIONS OF A FUTURE ALBERTA

The vision that municipalities hold for a future Alberta is one which see municipalities as a vital and dynamic part of the provincial mosaic, leaders in local governance and service delivery, responsive to the needs of their communities and their regions, and financially strong and viable. Within that vision, municipalities continue to offer Albertans a choice and diversity of community service and identity that constitutes an essential strength of the province.

This symbiotic relationship represents a key element in achieving Albertans' goals and aspirations. And supporting that relationship between the province and municipalities is the need for a strong partnership between the two, marked by cooperation and regular dialogue, consultation on proposed changes that may affect the other, an improved coordination of inter-related services, a clear and effective alignment of roles and responsibilities, a sustained financial capacity sufficient to provide the services, facilities, and infrastructure required by municipalities, and a provincial legislative and regulatory framework that encourages efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in local government.

CONCLUSION

The health and vitality of the province and its municipalities are inextricably linked. No discussion of Alberta's future can occur apart from a discussion as well of the province's local municipalities.

It is essential to Albertans that the places where they make their homes, conduct their business, attend school, and devote their leisure times are able to function effectively and viably. The province has a critical role to play in working with the municipalities to ensure that they are able to meet those needs within a future Alberta.

Only through a strong partnership between the provincial and municipal orders of government will Albertans continue to enjoy a high standard of living and quality of life.

Strong, vibrant, diverse and viable municipalities are essential to Alberta's future.